The Image of the Femme Fatale in William Shakespeare's ***Macbeth***

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ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare's ***Macbeth*** is one of the most interesting yet one of the bloodiest among his plays. The interest in this play stems from the fact that its characters are among the most famous of Shakespeare's characters, due to their complexity and their equivocal nature. The complexity of the characters shows Shakespeare's mature art of characterization, which is different from his previous plays. In this play, Shakespeare presents women as capable of evil and destructive acts as men. He goes as far as suggesting that in certain instances women can be more vicious than men, and they might be the motivators of iniquitous acts. Thus, the aim of this paper is to present the image of the femme fatale which is incarnated in the character of Lady Macbeth, and the impact of her atrocious acts on the entire action of the play.

المستخلص

تعد مسرحية ماكبث للكاتب وليام شيكسبير واحدة من اكثر مسرحياته متعة وهي ايضا اكثرها دموية. تاتي اهمية المسرحية من حقيقة كون شخصيات هذه المسرحية هي من بين الشخصيات الأكثر شيوعاً بسبب طبيعتها المعقدة والمتناقضة. حيث يبين هذا التعقيد في الشخصيات نضوج فن شكسبير لرسم ملامح شخصياته والذي يختلف بدوره عما فعله في الماضي. لقد أوضح شكسبير قدرة المرأة على الأفعال المدمرة الشريرة والتي يمكن مقارنتها بقدرة الرجل، بل في نواح أخرى بيَّن شكسبير إن قدرات المرأة قد تضاهي قدرات الرجل، فبإمكان المرأة أن تكون المحرض الأساس لأفعال الشر. لذلك فان الهدف الأساس لهذا البحث هو عرض صورة المرأة المدمرة والتي تتجسد بشخصية ليدي ماكبث وتأثير أفعالها المروعة على الأحداث الأساسية في المسرحية

Macbeth is one of the trendiest plays written by William Shakespeare. In this play Shakespeare shows aptly the role played by Lady Macbeth in causing the tragic ambience in the play. He also displays how she uses her beauty and her feminine charm to entice and motivate her husband to commit regicide. Thus, the main focus of this paper is to show how Lady Macbeth is a Femme Fatale who causes all the chaos and devastation in the play.

Before starting dealing with the play, it is convenient to start with a definition of the femme fatale. The Femme Fatale is

a mysterious and seductive woman whose charms ensnare her lovers in bonds of irresistible desire, often leading them into compromising, dangerous, and deadly situations. She is an archetype or stock character of literature and art. Her ability to entrance and hypnotize her victim was in the earliest stories seen as being literally supernatural, hence the most prosaic femme fatale today is still described as having a power akin to an enchantress, vampire, female monster or demon. The phrase is French for "deadly woman". A femme fatale tries to achieve her hidden purpose by using feminine wiles such as beauty, charm, and sexual allure. Typically, she is exceptionally well-endowed in addition to possessing these qualities. In some situations, she uses lying or coercion rather than charm.[1]

As it will be noticed, Lady Macbeth in one way or another is the incarnate of almost all the characteristics of the femme fatale.

The earliest published version of ***Macbeth*** appears in the First Folio in 1623, despite the fact that some critics argue that this version is a modified version of the lost original one. Simon Forman, a Jacobean playgoer, dated the play back to 1611 when he recorded in his book, ***Book of Plays*** that he saw this work performed on April 20, 1611 at the Globe theatre.[2]

The setting of the play is very murky and it indicates a sense of horror and danger that envelopes the play from the beginning till the end. Shakespeare wants to insinuate the sense of insecurity for almost all the characters in the play, which are menaced to death by the malignant plans of Lady Macbeth. Thus, the opening scene establishes a gloomy sense of fate. Shakespeare uses a fear-provoking show to grip his audience. We are soon introduced to the three Witches whose meeting is seen as an assembly of impending danger. Their meeting is accompanied by lightening, rain and thunderstorm, cackling greedily over their evil plans. Thus these Witches, while only a part of Shakespeare's spectacular opening scene, are used by him primarily to show that for the duration of this play, ugliness, evil, and power will be united to achieve chaos and murder. It is worthwhile to suggest here that those three witches have no impact over the character of Macbeth. Their presence is more of a sign of bad omen than of any relevant influence on any of the characters. A. C. Bradley suggests that the "prophecies of the three Witches are presented simply as dangerous circumstances with which Macbeth has to deal with… the influence of the first prophecies upon him came as much from himself as from them."[3]

Shakespeare indicates that if there is any outer influence on Macbeth, it is from Lady Macbeth and not from anybody else.

In the following scenes, we see Macbeth's rise to power, where he gains the title of Thane of Cawdor, as the three Witches have informed him. It is important to mention that Shakespeare juxtaposes the opening scenes of the play in a powerful continuity of mood. The violence of the reported battle, the tangible evidence of bloodshed provided by the wounded captain, and the general air of anxiety hanging over the camp, make the scenes unsettling. Taken together, the opening scenes give the distinct impression that the world of the play is in a general state of upheaval, as if the storm, the witches, and the political rebellion were all somehow associated with one another. This ominous impression foreshadows the tragedy that will soon swathe the play.

Having heard the prophecies and seen how they became true, Macbeth decides to write to his wife to inform her about what he has heard from the Witches. Considerably, Shakespeare does not introduce the character of Lady Macbeth till almost scene five of act one. In doing so, Shakespeare wants to give her prominence and he in fact wants to foreground her, through arousing the audience's expectations to meet her. Lady Macbeth appears very little in the entire action of the play, yet she is almost the motivator of malice in the play.

Scene five marks the introduction of Lady Macbeth, and also it provides the audience with an extensive view of her character. When the scene opens, she is reading a letter from Macbeth that informs

her of the predictions of the weird sisters, but claims to do so only in an effort to allow her to begin rejoicing their happy fates. In the letter Shakespeare shows that Macbeth will take no action like regicide. The act of regicide will be shown later is instigated by Lady Macbeth. It is important to notice that Macbeth describes Lady Macbeth in the letter as "my dearest partner of greatness."[4] This shows implicitly Macbeth's full satisfaction with his new title and his gratitude for his wife's part in his accomplishments.

Lady Macbeth's soliloquy that directly follows reading the letter really proves her as femme fatale:

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be
What thou art promis'd. Yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full o' the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way; thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it; what thou wouldst highly,
That thou wouldst holily; wouldst not play false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win; thou'dst have, great Glamis,
That which cries, 'Thus thou must do, if thou have it;'
And that which rather thou dost fear to do
Than wishest should be undone. Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,
And chastise with the valour of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round,
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have thee crown'd withal. (I, v, 13-38)

Lady Macbeth's first concerns and worries are of her ambition for her husband and of her husband's weaknesses, which is, his being "too full of the milk of human kindness". The word “pour” she uses suggests a sense of poison, which she tries to put in Macbeth’s ear so that he can overcome his nature and take the crown. So, the femme fatale's immediate response to herself is that Macbeth’s nature is not suited to the task of regicide. She deems that Macbeth possesses the ambition but not the cruelty to “catch the nearest way” to the throne. Interestingly, this shows that Macbeth has no intention and is not capable of regicide, and this does really answer the claim of some critics that Macbeth was the originator of the idea of regicide. Thus, Lady Macbeth decides to coax her husband and prompt him into action, and she will "chastise with the valour of my tongue/ All that impedes thee from the golden round." This reveals her wheedling, seductive and vicious nature.

Moreover, when she hears that King Duncan decides to spend the night beside their castle, she immediately contemplates regicide. She indicates that the raven, which is associated with messengers, will “croak the fatal entrance” of the king under her battlements (I, v, 37–38). Here, she presumes a leading role over the castle defense — its battlements — a role that is typically held by the lord of the castle. Once again, we are shown her utter rigidity and her inclemency. Her following soliloquy sketches her femme fatalistic nature:

Come, you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts! unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top full
Of direst cruelty; make thick my blood,
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief ! Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry, 'Hold, hold!' (I, v, 38-52)

Lady Macbeth beseeches the evil spirit to strip her from any kindness of woman. Women are known by their compassion and their merciful nature. Lady Macbeth does not like to affiliate to her gender. She likes to be full of cruelty of men. This assumption of masculinity comes in the form of a prayer. The prayer indicates that these spirits are malignant. Gender becomes a key issue as Lady Macbeth asks the spirits to "unsex" her. She wants the spirits to remove from her any feminine attributes that will interfere with her plan to murder Duncan. Lady Macbeth's words are ironic because Macbeth, who has excelled in military prowess, is conflicted about committing murder. Even before her prayer, Lady Macbeth seems more suited to committing regicide than her husband. Like Macbeth earlier, she also

asks that darkness and the “smoke of hell” to disguise her actions. At this point in the play, she is clearly the more active agent of the two. She shows that she is really a creepy woman, who poses threat on almost every character. William Hazlitt describes Lady Macbeth in the following words: "She is a bad woman, whom we hate, but whom we fear more than we hate."[5] Her presence in the play provides the action with a sense of revulsion and horror. She makes her castle unsafe place for anyone.

When Macbeth arrives he is shown as having no intention whatsoever to kill the king. He tells his wife that the king must depart next morning from their household safe. But, Lady Macbeth challenges this with ferocious passion: "O never,/ Shall Sun that Morrow see" (I, v, 58). She then notices the expression on her husband's face and warns him to hide his feelings more effectively, she also decides to unveil her plans, and she starts to sketch the role of her husband in the assassin: "Look like the innocent flower/ But be the serpent under 't" (I, v, 63-64). Here, she tries to "set aside conscience in herself and in her husband", and thus this "reasserts her Machiavellian denial of conscience."[6]

Macbeth, on the other hand, refuses to commit to any course of action regarding the sisters' prophecy. He puts off any decisions. However, he also does nothing to stop his wife's preparations for the demise of Duncan. Lady Macbeth's active and dominant role in this situation enables the audience to feel more sympathy with Macbeth, who is obviously tormented by being caught between his ambition

and his love and devotion for his king. He is shown as powerless under the enticement of his wicked and daunting wife.

Lady Macbeth has a great ability to hide her real and ferocious feelings which she has for others. Unlike Macbeth, she can easily control her feelings. When she sees the King in her castle, she never shows any reaction that might reveal her real intentions. She hypocritically and ironically tells the King: "Your majesty loads our house: for those of old,/ And the late dignities heap'd up to them,/ We rest your hermits" (I, vi, 18-20). Unaware of what is preplanned for him, Duncan describes Lady Macbeth as "Fair and noble hostess" (I, vi, 23). He thinks good of her and he does not know what lies beneath.

On the other hand, we see that Macbeth is really helpless before his wife's plans. His soliloquy reveals his inner conflict which is caused mainly by his wife's plans:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly; if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success: that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all. Here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases
We still have judgment here; that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague the inventor; this even-handed justice Commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice

To our own lips. He's here in double trust:

First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,

Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,

Who should against his murderer shut the door,

Not bear the knife myself. (I, vii, 1-16)

In his soliloquy, Macbeth studies regicide from different perspectives. He seems to be aware of the fact that killing the King will not end with the murder itself. The consequences of regicide would be extensive. For instance, from a religious standpoint, Duncan's death would "jump" or risk the hereafter because murder itself is a deadly sin. Furthermore, from a more earthbound standpoint, Macbeth understands that killing the king will also give others the opportunity to kill Macbeth if he becomes the king. Furthermore, Shakespeare makes use of what is known as the Divine Rights of the King, that is, the king is the deputy of God and any harm against the king will bring God's wrath. That is why Macbeth is so hesitant to commit the regicide. Besides, the act of regicide would violate not only his bond to Duncan as a subject but also his bond as a blood relative.

Thus, Macbeth demonstrates that he is acutely aware of the implications of his proposed action. Macbeth also knows that there is no good reason for him to commit such an act, because Duncan is a virtuous and good king. With horror, he also ponders the enormous grief that would grip the country if Duncan were killed. Notice that he makes this argument in terms of natural disorder, indicating that "tears shall drown the wind" if Duncan dies (I, vii, 25). Ultimately, his personal ambition for kingship is fueled by his wife's constant

motivations. She instills the regicide in his mind, and she renders him totally feeble and vulnerable.

Lady Macbeth interrupts her husband's soliloquy. She leaves him no way to consider what he struggles against, that is, the fear of regicide. But, she works to alter her husband's resolve. She begins by returning to the issue of gender, questioning his masculinity by calling him a coward. The "poor cat I." The adage that Lady Macbeth refers to here is the Latin phrase catus amat pisces sed non vult tingere plantas (45). The phrase means that the cat loves fish but does not wish to wet its feet.[7] This saying accurately describes Macbeth; he possesses the ambition to be king but not the resolve to take the action necessary to achieve it. Macbeth defends himself by claiming that not killing the king actually makes him more of a man. His reason tells him that killing a king, especially one who trusts him as much as Duncan does, diminishes his manhood. She knows very well that for Macbeth, the hero and the leader of army, manhood is everything he has. In order to succeed in convincing him, she must attack his manhood.

The femme fatale shows the last visage of her cruelty when she tells Macbeth:

I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this. (I, vii, 54-59)

Lady Macbeth's evil disposition seems to reach its peak in this statement as she demonstrates her monstrous determination. Through upturned logic, she suggests that commitment to regicide is more valuable in Macbeth's life than his commitment to his king. She entraps her husband with her own webs. He tries helplessly to fend off her attempts to convince him to regicide, but his endeavours are to no avail. Some historical references suggest that the real Lady Macbeth either killed her husband, and married Macbeth, or she did kill both her husband and her child to marry Macbeth.[8] Thus this character proves to be a she-devil who cajoles her husband and forces him to something he does not like. Macbeth's final line of the scene — "False face must hide what the false heart doth know" (I, vii, 82) — illustrates the disparity between his face, which is false because it is not an accurate representation, and his heart, which is false because he is being traitorous.

After being enticed by his wife, Macbeth's life changes dramatically and he starts to lose balance. Prior the cruel assassin of the King, Macbeth starts to have many psychological disturbances which are set in a form of visions and hallucinations. First, he sees a vision of a dagger flying in the air, and its handle is stained with blood. Macbeth clutches at his vision of a dagger, then halts: "I have thee not" (II, i, 35). Yet his eyes fasten on the vision: "I see thee still . . ." (ibid.), and ten lines later, he says again, "I see thee still . . ." (45). The dagger, from a broad psychological point of view can be seen as a kind of hallucination, produced by his imagination and intensified by his emotional exhaustion and strain, but for awhile its vision certainly

seems real enough to Macbeth. Thus, Macbeth's life, as a result of his cruel wife's demands and her continuous temptations for evil-doing, starts to deteriorate and loses its previous value.

Lady Macbeth shows another facet of her femme fatalistic character in the scene of regicide. Macbeth after killing the King becomes very frantic and he becomes overwhelmed with fear, guilt, and remorse: "I am afraid to think what I have done;/ Look on 't again I dare not" (II, ii, 50-51), he says. As a result he loses the joy of peaceful nights of "innocent sleep,/ Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleave of care" (II, ii, 36-37). Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, behaves very calmly. She even tells her husband that everything is simple. There was no reason to lose his firmness. Control yourself, she urges, and do not lose yourself in thoughts about the crime. Macbeth's reward for killing his kinsman is remorse and self-loathing; he seems more afraid of himself than of discovery. To further show her cruelty, Lady Macbeth returns the daggers to the location of the crime and spreads Duncan's blood on the drugged servants guarding the king's door. She returns and chides Macbeth for becoming “lost” in his thoughts about the king's death (II, ii, 71). Her behavior reveals her cruel strength, but it also reveals her shortsightedness. Lady Macbeth believes that after the murder is accomplished, its consequences will be only good. When the king's sons and others arrive to the crime scene, Lady Macbeth notices that her husband's face will divulge their crime, she directly feigns faintness to direct the others' attention away from Macbeth. She thus proves herself to be a ruthless and sadistic woman, having no human feelings whatsoever.

The rest of the play shows how Macbeth converts from a good, honest and loveable leader, who used to defend his country, to a ruthless and a serial killer, who kills many persons afterwards, even his most intimate friend, Banquo, for the sake of safeguarding his future as King. Lady Macbeth lets loose the monster inside her husband, thus introducing him to the world of crimes. Since Shakespeare's world is governed by poetic justice, Lady Macbeth receives the proper punishment for her callous crimes. First she is punished by somnambulism. She sleepwalks and reveals most of her crimes for the public. Unable to control the remorse The doctor, who is responsible for treating Lady Macbeth, rightly connects her inner turmoil to her actions. He describes both the turmoil and the deeds as "[u]nnatural" (V, i, 62). The doctor also fears that Lady Macbeth may try to commit suicide, and he orders that "the means of all annoyance" — anything she might use to hurt herself — be removed from her possession (V, i, 67). His words foreshadow her death. The doctor and the gentlewoman make frequent references to God and heaven in this scene. But we realize that Lady Macbeth, like her husband, has forsaken God and cannot seek divine aid for her troubled mind. While Macbeth moves from inner turmoil to remorseless determination during the course of the play, Lady Macbeth moves in the opposite direction, which will soon prove fatal. Thus, lady Macbeth commits suicide, because of her inability to live with the crimes she plans and masters. She causes the deaths of so many people. It is true she does not do that herself, but she urges and guides her husband to do them. As is seen, her husband would

have remained a respectable person, and would have become the King himself, had he not been influenced by his cruel wife's spell and temptations. She uses her beauty as a tool to entice her husband into action. She in fact is responsible for the entire tragedy in the play, because she motivates the hostile and aggressive side in her husband. She also brings about the destruction of Scotland, for Scotland lost many of its people, King Duncan, Banquo, Lady Mucduff and her children, and also in the battle between Macbeth's army and Macduff's army, where Macbeth is killed. Consequently, Lady Macbeth really proves herself to be a femme fatale, for she brings the destruction of many in the play. She, to use Kathleen McLuskie's words, turns her husband's

temptation to greatness into a test of his masculinity, willfully deforming her own femininity in the process. She attempts to share his greatness and mitigate his psychic horror at his action but falls, in the end, to mental torment and death, leaving him to the final, futile, solitary stand against inevitable defeat.[9]

NOTES

[1]"Femme Fatale" in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki /Femme_fatale, retrieved September 21, 2010. p 1 of 3.

[2]Janette Dillon, ***The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Tragedies***, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 114.

[3]A. C. Bradley, ***Shakespearean Tragedy***, (London: Macmillan, 1990), 287.

[4]William Shakespeare, ***New Swan Shakespeare: Macbeth***, (Essex: Longman, 1999), I, v. 9. Subsequent references to the play will be

from this edition and will appear parenthetically in y text, showing act, scene and line numbers successively.

[5]William Hazlitt, quoted in, Taralyn Adele MacMullen, "The Role of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's ***Macbeth***: A Production Thesis in Acting", Unpublished MA. Thesis (Louisiana Sate University, 2005),3.

[6]Abraham Stoll, "***Macbeth***'s Equivocal Conscience", in, ***Macbeth: A New Critical Essays***, ed., Nick Moschovakis (New York: Routledge, 2008), 136.

[7]William Shakespeare, ***New Swan Shakespeare: Macbeth***, "Notes on the Play", 44.

[8]Taralyn Adele MacMullen, 12.

[9]Kathleen McLuskie, "***Macbeth***, the Present, and the Past," in, ***A Companion to Shakespeare's Works: The Tragedies***, eds., Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2003), 393.

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